DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 262 424 CS 209 361

AUTHOR Harker, W. John
TITLE Reader Response and the Verbal Icon: Implications for English Education.
PUB DATE Nov 84
NOTE 7p.; Originally prepared as a working paper for the International Federation for the Teaching of English Invitational Seminar (Michigan State University, East Lansing, November 11-14, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS English Instruction; Higher Education; *Literary Criticism; Literary Devices; *Literature Appreciation; *Reader Response; *Reader Text Relationship; Reading Processes; *Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

During the past 15 years, a fundamental change has taken place in literary criticism, with a decline in New Criticism (literature viewed as a public object) and an increase in reader response criticism (literature viewed as a private experience). New Critics considered the meaning of a literary text to exist within the text as an independent and objective entity that was to be extracted by the reader. For the reader response critic, literary texts are meaningful not through their textual structure, but rather through the minds of readers, acting on them to produce meaning. As the role of the reader has shifted, so has the function of criticism. Since meaning is construed as a private event that happens to readers as they interact with the text, the critic's role has evolved toward describing the process by which this meaning is constructed in the reader's mind. Teachers can do a great deal to enrich and develop the reader's response. They can teach students that literary texts have a degree of autonomy, but that it is only by bringing what students already know as readers about the terminology of literature to these texts that new and more comprehensive formulations of their meanings will be derived and the process of literary education will be furthered. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED262424

Reader Response and the Verbal Icon: Implications for English Education

W. John Harker

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

W. John Harker

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 209 361

Reader Response and the Verbal Icon: Implications for English Education

W. John Harker
Faculty of Education, University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia
Canada - V8W 2Y2

During the past decade and a half, a fundamental change has taken place in literary criticism. This change may be described in terms of the decline of the New Criticism--the critical orthodoxy according to which most English teachers were educated in the past--and a corresponding increase in the influence of what has come to be termed reader response criticism. While there has been a proliferation of doctrinal debates among literary critics representing various factions within the reader response school, the implications for English education of this general shift in literary criticism toward reader response have been largely ignored. It is the purpose of this paper to review the New Criticism and the reader response criticism which has followed it in order to illuminate some of these implications for English education, and to define the role of English teachers within what is rapidly becoming the revised critical orthodoxy of our time.

The fundamental distinction between the New Criticism[1] and reader response criticism is literature viewed as a public object and literature viewed as a private experience. For the New Critics, the meaning of a literary text existed within the text itself. The task of the reader was to extract this meaning through a process of "explication," or close reading of the text involving careful analysis of such devices as ambiguity, polysemy, paradox, irony, and metaphor. The text was an independent and objective entity, one which existed as a "verbal icon" or a "well wrought urn," a container of the meaning which the reader was required to extract. Literary texts took on primary significance and, as a result, literary works became public objects, removed from authorial intention and reader affect. What literary texts "said" was what they meant. That the text could be complex, even obscure, was grist to the mill of the critical enterprise. But this did not take away from the primacy of the text as the object of literary study.

A further extension of this primacy was that if literature was to be conceived as a public object, then the texts of criticism--what critics said about literature--represented full descriptions of the critical process as well as complete formulations of literary understanding. The critic's task was to provide a holistic description of the text, its structure and thereby its meaning revealed in a complete and final formulation. At the same time, the critical process was to be carried out according to prescribed public procedures which were observable as they were implemented. The validity of their implementation was subject to evaluation and comment according to established criteria which were available to all who were suitably educated. Thus the critic worked in public with public objects. Because of this, the results of his work--the critical texts he produced--were themselves public objects, ones which were accessible to the judgments of others since the basis of these judgments was the shared education which critics and their readers possessed. In this way, the New Criticism was a public criticism, standing outside the critics themselves, detached and objective, as much the verbal icons and well wrought urns of their critical enterprise as were the literary works upon which their criticism was based.

For the reader response critic, all this has changed. Literary texts are meaningful, not through their textual structure, but rather through the mind of

**This manuscript was originally prepared as a working paper for the International Federation for the Teaching of English Invitational seminar held at Michigan State University, November 11-14, 1984.

the reader acting on them to produce meaning. Similarly, the critical enterprise has shifted its focus from providing explanations of the formal meanings of texts to providing descriptions of how readers construct their own meanings: The emphasis has shifted from public knowledge to private response.

For the purposes of brevity, and at the risk of over-simplification, contemporary reader response criticism will be represented here by reference to the work of two literary critics, Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser.[2] It is characteristic of the state of reader response criticism that, while the general orientation of these two critics is similar, it is not identical. Fish[3] argues that the reader takes over the text. He maintains that the meaning a reader imposes on the text is a result of the interpretive strategies the reader brings to the text. These interpretive strategies precondition the reader to look for certain features in the text which he then reads to find and which serve as the basis for his interpretation. Fish accounts for similarity in interpretation among different readers through his notion of interpretive communities--groups of readers who share similar interpretive strategies. However, the mechanism through which the reader brings meaning to the text is the same irrespective of whether it is one reader, and therefore an interpretive community of one who is seeking to gain converts, or a group of readers whose orientation to the text is the same as evidenced by the similarity of their interpretations. Iser,[4] on the other hand, grants the text some autonomy. He argues that the text establishes a framework which directs the mind of the reader toward an interaction with the text initiated by the indeterminacy of the text itself. What is similar in both Fish and Iser, and what constitutes the shared tenet of their criticism which separates them from the New Critics and imbues their criticism with its contemporaneity is the place given to the reader as a maker of meaning. The primacy of the text is removed and in its place the reader has taken over. The extent of this takeover varies between them, but the basic fact is that it is the reader who constructs meaning in concert with the text, not under its domination.

As the role of the reader has shifted, so has the function of criticism. Since meaning has come to be construed as an "event," a "performance," something that "happens" to the reader as he interacts with the text, it has become invisible, covert, and private. It may be that different readers reach the same conclusions about the meaning of literary works, but this is because they employ the same interpretive strategies, not that the text, as an external repository of meaning, has had its meaning extracted--that it has been "explicated." And since the reader's response is private, the critic's role is to describe the process by which meaning is contructed in the mind of the reader--how the "events" brought on by the reader meeting the text take place--rather than to provide public readings of public verse. It is this process, which both Fish and Iser proclaim is synonymous with meaning, that is the focus of the critic, not its product. In this way meaning is essentially personal, private, and unpredictable. For the reader response critic, meaning has become event, not form. Meaning exists not in the structure of a literary work, but in what that structure does and becomes through the dynamic process of the reader's mind acting on and reacting to the text.

Fundamental to the educational enterprise is the question of what knowledge can derive from literature. From the perspective of the New Criticism, the knowledge which was to result from teaching literature was an indoctrination into the method of formal explication. Since the critic's job was to explain

the meaning to be found in literary texts, the teacher's job was to introduce students to the agreed upon procedures of this methodology. This process of instruction was implicit in the enterprise of literary education, with suitable modifications in intensity and depth, from primary school to graduate school. Over a period of time and through a process of literary education, the student learned a system of literary analysis through which the public meanings of literary works could be revealed.

Reader response criticism has changed all this. Meaning has gone from being public to being private, from being determinate to being relative. And this creates difficulties for education. Are teachers merely to present students with literary texts and expect them to somehow work out their own responses, accepting as valid any response simply because it is one, no matter how bizarre? Or, following Fish, are teachers to indoctrinate their students into the teacher's own interpretive community, no matter how unconsciously or even unwillingly this may be done, and thereby engage in a process of pedagogical imperialism in the classroom? Or, following Iser, should the teacher teach the process of identifying the indeterminacies in literary texts and then urge students to fill them in so that students will formulate their own meanings? Or should we all go back to the good old New Criticism and try to forget these other people?

Direction for answering these questions can be taken from Harte Crane, who, writing as a poet and not as a critic, asked:

> In the minds of people who have sensitively read, seen and experienced a great deal, isn't there a terminology something like shorthand as compared to the usual descriptions of dialectics, which the artist ought to be right in trusting as a reasonable connective agent toward fresh concepts, more inclusive evaluations?[5]

It is this terminology which provides the connection between the reader and the text, and which defines the teacher's role in terms of the student.

The knowledge which literature communicates is knowledge off itself. It is not a closely held knowledge, a knowledge accessible only through indoctrination into recondite procedures and methodologies as the New Critics maintained. But it is a special and at times specific kind of knowledge which is as unique to literature and its students as are the laws of thermodynamics to physics and physicists. It is a knowledge of the conventions of literature and literary expression. But it is more than this. It is a knowledge of the "subject" of literature--the ways in which reality is represented, refined, and even distorted in literature.[6] In this way, the text speaks to the reader--it is neither the verbal icon which raises an isolated meaning before him, nor is it a set of features to be selected according to some preconceived notion of which ones are important, as argued by Fish. The literary text has a meaning of its own; without this meaning it could not be literature since it would not possess that quality of uniqueness which both requires and permits it to be interpreted differently from any other literary text. In this sense, a literary text is a public object since it brings before a public readership a set of conventions and features which stand apart from the reader but which demand and excite the reader's interpretation. These conventions and features constitute the terminology Crane speaks of and they are the devices authors use to communicate their meaning; they are the code of literary expression. It is a terminology built up through a history of collective and conventionalized literary experience, and it cannot be dismissed as of no consequence to readers or to teachers. The text stands before the reader on its own terms and it speaks from the perspective of

the collective literary experience which it represents and upon which it depends for its interpretation.

But if the text is to communicate, it and what it says must be received. And it is in the process of reception that the private experience of the reader takes on significance. If for no other reason than the enormous body of evidence revealed by psycholinguistic research, the role of the reader as a contributor to meaning cannot be ignored.[7] Texts do not stand outside the minds of readers as repositories of meaning to be sought out for understanding to occur. The response of the reader to the text is as important as the text itself in determining meaning. And this is as true of literary texts as it is of any others. What the reader must bring to the literary text in order to understand the fresh concepts and more inclusive understandings of which Crane speaks is a background of literary experience which permits him to receive and manipulate the terminology of the text and thereby actively to participate in the subject of literature--the reality which literature conveys. From this relationship of reader with text, meaning is constructed. It is by a process of recognition, a recognition of conventions and features within the text which are meaningful because they have had significance in the past that the reader's interaction with the text is excited and the process of meaning construction begins. But this process goes beyond simple recognition since the configuration of terminology in any text must be to at least some degree unique. It is only by manipulating and reformulating this recognized terminology, and by synthesizing it into new determinations of meaning, that literary texts take shape in the reader's mind. From this experience literary knowledge emerges, not only a knowledge of what the text says as a public statement, but also a knowledge of how the reader's mind meets the subject of the text, manipulates it, and responds to it to give it coherence. This is the knowledge which reading literature gives. It is a knowledge of human thought in action, and because it is this, a cognitive response to a literary object, it is a knowledge of worlds revealed through language. There can be no more important an objective for education than this.

But what does all this mean for teaching literature? What can or should the teacher do? These questions can be answered together. Beginning with the recognition that the reader's response is a private response, there is a great deal that the teacher can do to enrich and develop this response. An awareness and a sensitivity to the terminology of literature can be taught by actively demonstrating how literature "works," by showing how the configurations of conventions and features which literature displays shape its meaning and even its intent in the minds of readers. It is only through this educative process that students will achieve the fresh concepts and more inclusive evaluations which Crane rightly maintains the poet depends upon to communicate the subject of his text. Without this, students' literary development will remain at the level of simple affect. This is not to suggest that meaning must be prescribed by arbitrating the conventions and features of a literary work to which students should respond. But it is to suggest that in the process of literary education, there is much to be done in the classroom. The direction of this effort must be toward teaching students that literary texts do have a degree of autonomy, but it is only by bringing what students already know as readers about the terminology of literature to these texts that new and more comprehensive formulations of their meanings will be derived and the process of literary education will be furthered.

Notes

1. The major texts of the New Criticism include Cleanth Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947); Allen Tate, Collected Essays, (Denver: Allen Swallow, 1959); Rene Welleck and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1942); W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, The Verbal Icon (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

2. For reviews of the range of reader response criticism, see Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, eds., The Reader in the Text (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Jane P. Tompkins, ed., Reader Response Criticism (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

3. Much of Fish's criticism is collected in his Is There a Text in This Class? (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1980).

4. Iser's theoretical stance is most fully represented in his The Act of Reading (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); applications of his theory to particular works are collected in his The Implied Reader (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

5. Quoted in Philip Horton, Harte Crane: The Life of an American Poet (New York: Viking Press, 1957), p. 332.

6. W. John Harker, "Reading Poetry," Journal of Aesthetic Education 12, no. 4 (October 1978): 73-85.

7. W. John Harker, "Comprehending the Discourse of Poetry," in August Flammer and Walter Kintsch, eds., Discourse Processes (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1982), pp. 570-581.